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SECRET AGENTS

UP FRONT

Gathering in the ballroom of San Francisco's stately St. Francis Hotel, the group looked for all the world like the alumni of an Ivy League club. Sleek and elegant, in black tie or ball gowns, they traded stories about their daring younger days, tales which would have seemed exaggerated in any other setting. But these were not just rich old grads on a spree; over the dais at the gathering hung a gigantic photograph of Maj. Gen. William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan. These were the veterans of the Office of Strategic Services, the legendary World War II intelligence unit commanded by Donovan. It was officially established by President Roosevelt 40 years ago this month.

Forerunner of the CIA, the OSS was the first clandestine intelligence agency the United States ever had—and many still say the best. "We were all young and crazy when we first started the killing and the adventure," recalls OSS veteran John Shaheen, 66, who headed special projects in the war and is now a millionaire oilman. "We were Donovan's fair-haired boys. He got the best guys he could—youngsters, oldsters, gangsters, hoodlums and athletes. He even recruited a few from San Quentin and Sing Sing."

As last month's sentimental reunion of 350 alumni proved, the OSS recruited an astonishing lot. Donovan brought in lawyers, soldiers, Ivy League students, watercolor artists, file clerks and enough *Social Register* types to cause Washington's wartime wags to joke that the agency's initials stood for "Oh So Social." But the alumni of the organization include some high-powered achievers as well. Among them: former Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, TV chef Julia Child, actor-novelist Sterling Hayden, artist Dong Kingman, fashion designer John Weitz, travel writer Temple Fielding, diamond merchant Bert Jolis, former Madison Square Garden President Mike Burke, the Countess of Romanones, former CIA Director William Colby and present top spook William Casey. "It was," said OSS veteran and Cleveland department store heiress Kay Halle, "the greatest collection of brains ever gathered under one roof."

America had considered spying unsporting since Benedict Arnold, but the war persuaded FDR of the need for a first-rate intelligence service. Starting from scratch, Donovan grabbed his agents wherever he could locate them. Halle was recruited at a Washington cocktail party, Burke at a friend's house, Jolis in a café overlooking the skating rink at Rockefeller Center. But the training of these spies-to-be was as demanding as their backgrounds were patrician. The Countess of Romanones (then Aline Griffith, 21, of Pearl River, N.Y.) was taught how to stab an enemy beneath the chin with the point of a rolled-up newspaper. James Jesus Angleton, later the CIA's chief spymaster, learned his trade on a dry run in which he infiltrated the office of the chairman of Western Electric. Weitz remembers sitting through a 36-hour-long examination in a tent amidst a constant din of canned battle noise, with an occasional tear gas grenade tossed in, just to keep the budding Bonds on their toes. Colby recalls a more civilized and devious test: "After a full day in the field, we were fed a huge dinner and put next to a fire to discuss some boring subject like the future of German youth after the war," he says. "About half of the group fell right to sleep. That was one way to see who had stamina."

That quality was indispensable. In 1945 Colby parachuted into Nazi-occupied Norway to blow up bridges and railroad tracks—and was nearly killed in the process. "The night we blew up the track, we snuck up to lay the charges, but the Germans noticed something wrong and started shooting at us," he recalls. "We pulled our charges, jumped the fence and ran. Thirty seconds later the track blew up. We were lucky to survive."

Aline Griffith in 1945 found herself outside Madrid in a speeding car with a Nazi collaborator who was convinced that she was about to expose him. The Nazi decided to strangle her. "I had been taught very well how to roll, how to defend myself," she remembers. "I was able to open the door while we were moving very fast, and I rolled out and wasn't hurt at all." (She subsequently married the Spanish Count of Romanones and settled in Madrid.)

John Singlaub, later sacked as the U.S. Army's commanding general in South Korea in a policy squabble with Jimmy Carter, parachuted into Nazi France with two other agents for company. Later, joined by a few others, they captured an airfield, used it as a supply drop point, and finally organized a Resistance unit that hooked up with the American Army on the Loire. "It was a slightly hazardous situation," the then lieutenant modestly allows.

Most OSS adventures sound like outtakes from a James Bond movie, but some veterans tell tales that could find their way into a Mel Brooks spoof. Temple Fielding smuggled a psychological weapon—a potion that duplicated the smell of human excrement—into German-occupied Yugoslavia.